

The Athenian Mercury.

Tuesday, November 12. 1695.

Quest. 1. **H**OW must Virgil be understood in these following verses, In Book fourth of his Georgicks. Where he speaks of the Nile as in the Indies?

*Nam qua Pellæi gens fortunata Conopi,
Accolit effuso stagnantem flumine Nilum,
Et circum pîtis vehitur sua riva phaselis :
Quaque pharetrata vicinia Persidis urget,
Et viridem Ægyptum Nigra facundat arena,
Et diversa ruens septem discurrit in ora,
Usque Coloratis amnis devexus ab Indis:
Omnis in hac regio Certam facit arte salutem.*

Ans. Many Commentators have thought this place too difficult to be explained; tho there has been two or three Authors that have made some probable Conjectures about it. Mr. Segræis who had taken a great deal of pains in considering Virgil, tells us, That the fourth verse ought to be put after the fifth, and that Virgil spoke of the Nile in the four first, and of the Indies in the following ones. He says, this sense is most conformable to the Character and Genius of the Poet. And he thinks 'tis very improbable, that Virgil, who is so just and exact in his expressions, should employ seven verses about the Nile only, and that in such obscure terms too; Besides this, 'tis a very great fault to place the Nile upon the frontiers of Persia; Virgil could not be ignorant of its situation, Geography was more known in his time; therefore 'tis better to transport a verse from its place, than to attribute so great an oversight to the Prince of Heroic Poets. But father Lamy is of another opinion, he is absolutely against this transposition, and says, that by these verses Virgil, tho in a very ambiguous manner, designed to show that the Art of recovering Bees was practised in those Countries that he describes. The Antient Geographers divided Egypt into higher and lower, and this last was comprehended between the branches of the Nile towards its emptying it self; and its Western avenue was called Conope. This part was very fruitful, Nilus ibi coloni vice fungens. 'Twas near this place that Alexander built Alexandria. Thus far there is nothing superfluous in his verses. And in the four following verses he passes to another Country in Egypt, which, he tells us, was in the Neighbourhood of Persia: Here 'tis his Geography is accused, and with very good reason if we examine it by the Idea's, we at this day have of Persia and Egypt, but 'tis not improbable but that in his time the Empire of Persia was more extended than it is now: We know Egypt was once under it, and if then this Empire reached to the Red Sea, Virgil was not so ignorant as is pretended. Pliny, who lived since his time, says, that Persæ rubrum mare semper incoluere. In Pliny's time and a long while before, Persia was known only under the name of the Parthians; Persia in Parthorum Nomen jam pridem translata, and he adds that the Empire of the Parthians extended to the Red Sea. Other Authors say the same thing. But Mr. Segræis whom we before mention'd, will have it to be the Copyists and not Virgil, who have transported Nilus out of its place, he says, 'tis the River Indus he speaks of, which this verse shews, Usque Coloratis amnis devexus ab Indis, since the River which runs from the Indies cannot be the Nile. And if we understand these verses after this manner, it may be still a further justifying of Virgil to know, that 'twas formerly believed that the Ethiopians, from whom the Nile takes its source, came from some Neighbouring Countries of the Indies. Eusebius has these words, *Æthiopes ab Indo flumine Coniungentes, Fuxta Ægyptum confederunt.* There is a Brackman also, in Philostrates, who maintains that the

Ethiopians drew their original from the Indians. Ortelius in his treasure of Geography proves that Ethiopia was called India formerly, before Geography was so well known as it is now, 'twas generally thought that India and Ethiopia joyned together. Arrian in his History of the Wars of Alexander, relates that this Conqueror believed, when he was arrived at Indus, that 'twas the source of the Nile, and that this River after having run through vast solitudes might lose its Name, and take that of Nilus when it arrived at Egypt. Yet however, let persons have thought what they pleased of these Rivers, 'tis enough to justify Virgil, if it is but granted that Ethiopia has been called India.

Quest. 2. 'Tis known that all Nations have believed something of a God, but how far may a general agreement be said to be a proof of it.

Ans. This testimony is of very great force, whether it be considered in its self, or in respect to its original. Lactantius thought it so good a proof, that having cited a great many both Heathen and Christian Authors against the Atheists, he urges the consent of all People and Nations, many of which altho they differed almost in every thing else, yet generally agreed in the belief of a Divinity, *Testimonium populorum atque gentium in una hac re non dissidentium.* By an Antient Philosopher probable things have been rankt in this order; that whatever seems true to some learned persons is in some sort probable; what appears so to the generality of Learned men is more probable; and what is believed of most men the Ignorant as well as the Learned is yet more probable; but that in which all men agree is in the highest degree of probability, and approaches very near to those truths which may be demonstrated, so that he might very justly pass for an extravagant or dogmatical person, who should have the boldness to deny it. There is no man in the world which by his single Judgment, can balance the constant authority of all mankind; If any person should through a contradictory spirit, or by any other motive, affirm that snow is black as Anaxagoras did, that motion is impossible, as Zeno did, or with Heraclitus say, that two contradictory propositions may be true in the same time, there would be no other way to refute a man who should reject such clear principles, but to oppose to him the universal consent of all men; and if he refused to agree to it, he ought to be lookt upon either with pity or contempt. He had need have very powerful and clear reasons, who should resist the common opinion of all men, and equally accuse them of Error. Several Heathen Philosophers who cannot be suspected of having spoke of any thing but their true thoughts, have lookt upon this common agreement as a considerable argument; *The consent of all men, says Seneca, is of very great weight with us; a mark that a thing is true, is when it appears so to all the world. Thus we conclude there is a Divinity, because all men believe it, there being no Nations, how corrupt soever they be, which deny it.* Cicero, has said the same thing in several places, and has observed that altho many Nations have had extravagant opinions of the Divinity, yet they all agreed in the belief that there is an Eternal Power on whom we depend. In the Horrell disputes, says Maximus of Tyre, *In the deepest contestations and in the Diversity of opinions which are amongst men, we see a Law and a Doctrine equally established throughout all the Earth, which is, That there is a God who is King and Father of all men, and many Gods, the Sons of this supreme being, who reigns with him. 'Tis what is confess'd by all the world, Greeks and Barbarians, the inhabitants of the continent and of the Isle*

both learned and Ignorant persons There are an infinite number of such instances, where the general consent of mankind has been thought a good argument for the being of a God. 'Tis true there has been some men who have contradicted this universal consent, but, they are in very small number, and ought according to the opinion of some to be lookt upon as Monsters; and if we consider the original of this universal opinion, we shall still better perceive its force. For it can only have taken its rise from one of these four things, first either it must be united to the understanding, like to the most evident principles of Sciences, and the inclination we have to be happy, as *Cicero* and many Philosophers have thought. Or else that we have a natural disposition to imbrace this opinion, as soon as it is proposed to us, as our eyes are naturally disposed to perceive the light when it appears, as some have believed: or some powerful reason which presents its self to the mind of all men, even of the most ignorant, as *Plutarch* thought. Or Lastly, from antient tradition, which came from one and the same source, which has dispers'd this opinion thro' all the Earth according to belief of some others. We cannot imagine any other way, whereby this opinion shou'd be introduced amongst all men, who so much incline to think diversely of one and the same thing. And which soever of 'em we choose the argument is equally strong and conclusive; if it is from the light of nature, 'tis as extravagant to deny it, as it wou'd be to say, that the most evident principles of the Sciences are false. If it's said that 'tis by a natural disposition, that men believe there is a God, why shou'd we resist an inclination of nature, since its motions never deceive us? Or if 'tis agreed that there is a powerful reason which perswades all men of it, we must renounce common sense if we refuse to assent to it. But if it's said that man received this knowledge from an antient tradition; which indeed appears most probable; it must be inquired from whence this tradition came, and who was the common Master of all mankind. We very well know the Names of those who have introduced any sect, or engaged people in certain opinions, but we find neither the Name of him who is pretended to have invented this Doctrine, nor the place, nor time in which he has lived, nor the manner whereby it was introduced and dispers'd amongst men. 'Tis this which makes us believe that the Authors of this tradition are our first parents; who as they cou'd not be ignorant of their original, so undoubtedly they taught this truth to their Children. 'Tis natural to conceive that 'twas by this means all men have learnt it: this thought leads us to another which is of very great importance in this matter, 'tis that all men have descended from one man only, or at least from a small number of persons (who were altogether, from whence it will appear that man had a beginning, and that we cannot reject the Doctrine of the existence of a God as a political fiction. For supposing man to have a beginning upon Earth, from whence cou'd he draw his original but from such a Divinity as we conceive, what other being cou'd have formed such admirable bodies as ours, and united such intelligences to them as our Souls? Let those who deny this, tell us also who taught the first men there was a God, and how it came into their mind that they drew their existence from him, if he who made them had not discovered to them after a sensible manner that 'twas to him they owed their being. And since it is what they have taught to their posterity, we have no reason to refuse our belief, nor can we imagine any witnesses more worthy of faith, nor men who can give us a better account of their original than themselves, therefore we cannot reasonably reject a tradition which came from them. We find *Plato* in his *Timæus* to

use the same Argument, *We ought*, says he, to credit those who have said they were of the race of the Gods, since they have said they perfectly knew those from whom they were descended; it is not possible to distrust the Children of the Gods, altho what they say does not carry evident demonstration with it, as they only advance things which regard themselves, it is but just to believe them.

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